Technical Writing for Non-Writers

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Overview

Warm-up
5 Basic Rules
Questions & Answers
Sources
5 Basic Rules
#1: Change Perspective

“Don't tell me how it works ...

... tell me how to use it!”
#2: Obey the KISS-Principle

words

“utilize” → “use”
“indicate” → “show”, “tell”, “say”
“prerequisite” → “requirement”

grammar

“Click OK. The Printer Options dialog appears.”

sentences

one idea, one sentence

fillers

“already existing”, “completely new”, “simply”
#3: Split Into Chunks

complex information

split into chunks
first things first: what everyone needs to know
3-level hierarchy: 1. – 1.1 – 1.1.1
Miller’s Law: 7 ± 2 items (procedure: < 10 steps)

structure

does it reflect your readers’ goals?
form follows function
  • instructions: active voice, procedure with steps
  • warning: before procedure/step
  • background, concepts: before procedure
#4: Be Consistent

choice of words

“symbolic link” – “softlink” – “symlink”

spelling

“add-on” – “addon” – “add on”

parallel constructions

“Why white space is important:

• Attention focus
• It visually separates sections.
• Breaking content into chunks”
#5: Avoid Interruptions

long commands, particles

“however”, “nevertheless”, “therefore”,
“for example”, “if necessary”...

“They are not, however, marked as installed.”
“However, they are not marked as installed.”

phrasal verbs

“Shut the server down.”
“Shut down the server.”
Q & A Session
Sources

Comprehensive list of sources: https://git.io/fosdem-tw-src

- DeRespinis, Francis et al.
  “The IBM Style Guide: Conventions for Writers and Editors”

- Kohl, John R.

- Achtelig, Marc
  “How to Write That F***ing Manual: Ohne Umschweife zu benutzerfreundlichen Handbüchern und Hilfen”
  Bilingual edition: English + German
  ISBN 978-3-943860-01-6 (256 p., 2012)

- Hargis, Gretchen et al.

- “SUSE Documentation Style”
  https://doc.opensuse.org/products/opensuse/Styleguide/opensuse_documentation_styleguide_sd/

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